Mark Twain and the Mississippi River

November 2009

English 11 (F)

“The Mississippi is well worth reading about. It is not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable. Considering the Missouri its main branch, it is the longest river in the world—four thousand three hundred miles.”

- Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883

**Review the Presentation**

**Q: Where is the Mississippi River?**

A: The Mississippi River flows from north to south, passing through ten different states including Mississippi, Ohio, Louisiana, and Missouri.

**Q: What was Mark Twain's inspiration to write about the Mississippi River? What is the relationship between the Mississippi River and Mark Twain?**

A: During Mark Twain's boyhood years, he stated, “there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboat man.” He longed desperately to become a steamboat pilot, considered the grandest position of all steamboat men. Twain grew up along the Mississippi River, always in awe of the romantic yet dangerous life shared by those living in the area. He therefore grew attached to the river and it became an undeniable and inseparable aspect of his character and inspiration.

**Q: What is the origin of the moniker, Mark Twain, and why is this penname significant?**

A: While his true name was Samuel Clemens, he adopted the name Mark Twain to symbolize his relationship with the Mississippi River. This penname means “two fathoms,” a term that marks the safe level of water for sailing in.

**More Information:**

http://summarycentral.tripod.com/theadventuresofhuckleberryfinn.htm

<http://www.pbs.org/marktwain/scrapbook/02_old_times/index.html>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/huckfinn/study.html#explanation3>

<http://www.slashdoc.com/documents/49112>

**Fact-Based: True / False and Multiple Choices**

1. When Mark Twain was close to completing The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, he wrote Life on the Mississippi, which recounts his memories of the Mississippi River.

2. The towns along the banks of the Mississippi River are considered “uncivilized.”

3. Clemens' penname originated from Captain Sellers, who often boasted of his knowledge and expertise to the young Clemens.

4. Mark Twain applied description of the Mississippi River to evoke imagery and a fluctuating mood that is described as wild, tranquil, and even mysterious.

5. Twain's portrayal of Huck and Jim on the Mississippi River is characterized by a sense of security on the serene river.

6. When Mark Twain was a boy, his dream was to become a

A. Southern Writer

B. Mississippi River Novelist

C. Steamboat-man

D. Abolitionist

7. The Mississippi River experience symbolizes which of the following ideals?

A. Freedom

B. Eternity

C. Wealth

D. Friendship

8. The Ohio River, which is connected to the Mississippi River, is the destination for Jim and Huck. However, they miss the mouth of the Ohio River because

A. Tom Sawyer distracts them with his conversation

B. they had fallen asleep and sailed past the mouth

C. they lack navigation skills and mistake the mouth for another river

D. they cannot find the mouth when a thick fog conceals their view

9. Mark Twain's true name was Samuel Clemens. This penname implies that a boat was in safe water, meaning

A. Two Feet

B. Two Fathoms

C. Two Books

D. Two Nautical Miles

10. The Mississippi River passes through approximately how many states?

A. Six

B. Fourteen

C. Ten

D. Twenty

**Short Answers**

1. The distinctive aspect of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is its flowing setting. It attracts the reader's attention not only through the topic of slavery, which was at its peak, but also through the physical setting, which ranges from Missouri to Ohio. Through the viewpoints of a young boy and an immature slave, the Mississippi River is described from an outsider perspective of society. How do you think the novel would have been different if a land route, instead of a water route, was utilized throughout the plot? How does the Mississippi River symbolize freedom effectively?

2. Mark Twain spent his younger years near the Mississippi River and worked for a steamboat company. His life as a pilot inspired him to write about the river throughout his literary works. Do you have an inspirational place like the Mississippi River? What about this place evokes inspiration? Compare and contrast your inspirational location with Twain's portrayal of the Mississippi River.

3.No other literary figure has been as closely tied to the Mississippi as Mark Twain. After the Civil War halted his career as a steamboat pilot, Twain turned to journalism and literature. He chose the pen name, "Mark Twain.” What is so significant about this? Why do you think he chose to use this name?

4. In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Twain satirized the dark side of human nature - greed, corruption, alcoholism, and especially racism - by using a fourteen-year-old boy as the narrator. Twain's novel is a raw yet bittersweet story of Huck's development through lessons taught by Jim, a runaway slave. How does Twain utilize the Mississippi River to draw out such lessons? What characteristics of the river symbolize Huck's growth and maturity?

5. Mark Twain is often labeled a realist in his portrayal of life on the Mississippi River. What aspects of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn create a true-to-life image of life back then? Are there any portions of Huck's journey along the Mississippi River that seem to depart from realism?

**Quote Analysis: Analysis the following Quotes (Content, Context, and Importance)**

1. “It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn’t ever feel like talking loud, and it warn’t often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle” (119).

2. “The fifth night we passed St. Louis, and it was like the whole world lit up. In St. Petersburg they used to say there was twenty or thirty thousand people in St. Louis, but I never believed it till I see that wonderful spread of lights at two o'clock that still night” (120).

3. “Well, it being away in the night, and stormy, and all so mysterious-life, I felt just the way any other boy would a felt when I see that wreck laying there so mournful and lonesome in the middle of the river” (121).

4. "We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" (176).

5. "It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened” (179).

**Bibliography:**

Burns, Ken, and Dayton Duncan, prod. *Mark Twain*. Florentine Films, 2001. *Public Broadcasting Service*. Web. 21 Nov. 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/marktwain/scrapbook/02\_old\_times/index.html>.

"Mark Twain / Huck Finn." File last modified on 14 Dec. 2001. *Slashdoc*. Web. 21 Nov. 2009. <http://www.slashdoc.com/documents/49112>.

"The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." *Summary Central*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Nov. 2009. <http://summarycentral.tripod.com/theadventuresofhuckleberryfinn.htm>.

Twain, Mark, and SparkNotes Editors, eds. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (SparkNotes Literature* *Guide)*. Spark Publishing, 2003. *Sparknotes*. Ed. SparkNotes Editors. Web. 19 Nov. 2009. <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/huckfinn>.